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Rural Pioneering

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THE PALIMPSEST

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Rural Pioneering

Our farm five miles north of West Branch in Cedar County consisted of 160 acres. There were no improvements on the land when father, William M. Collins, bought it in 1850. For some years only a few acres were fenced and under cultivation. It took time and much hard labor to improve the wild land, so that for years a part of almost every farm "laid out to the commons". It was everybody's pasture.

Northwest of us there was a big slough which was green in the spring long before the upland grass could be seen. Much of the time the ground was wet and the water was never far below the surface, but in midsummer the slough got dry enough for men to go in with their scythes and mow the coarse grass for hay. There was always a good crop of slough grass. It was the custom as well as common courtesy for each man to mow the same part each year. If a careless settler overstepped the proper bounds trouble ensued.

Cattle could roam at will on the commons many miles from home. One cow, the leader of the herd, carried a bell and all the rest followed "the old bell cow". From afar the cattle seemed to scent the early grass in the "Big Slough". One of my first remembrances of early spring is the dingle lingle of cowbells in the morning as herds came from miles around to graze on the fresh young grass. As the upland grass became more plentiful they stayed nearer home. When they had eaten their fill they lay down in the shade and chewed their cuds through the heat of the day. Toward evening, as a rule, they grazed toward their home where they were penned for the night and milked. After the morning milking "the bars were let down" and they wandered forth for another day.

Even dumb animals have a love for home, and usually the cattle were not far away when evening came. Once in a while, however, they would wander afar with some other herd and it would take hours to find them. If the owner did not appear before late milking time and the farmer knew the cows did not belong in his neighborhood they were milked "to keep their bags from spoiling", which was a kindness to the cows as well as to their owner.

Sometimes a cow would become unruly and de-

cide not to be driven home. I remember one such exhibition of perversity by "Old Black Betsy"—the bell cow was always called old. One evening father went for the cows about the usual time. The horses were all in the field at work, so he went afoot as he frequently did, expecting to find the cattle nearby for we had heard the bell all afternoon. He found them about a mile away and started them home. When they came to the creek they stopped to drink and then meandered slowly toward the barnyard. All except Betsy. She tossed her head and started down the creek, plunged into the brush, and stopped. She was as black as midnight except for a spot of white on her forehead. It was dusk and beginning to sprinkle rain. When father worked his way through the brush too near to suit her, she would find a new place to hide and hold her head still so there was no sound of the bell. She crossed the creek several times, finally coming out at a ford. There she took to the road and went home in a very sedate manner. She was soon quietly chewing her cud in the yard. Mother had milked the other cows, the boys had come from the field, done the chores, lighted the candle in the old tin lantern, and were about to go in search of father when he arrived tired, wet, hungry, and with a desire to butcher old Betsy.

A plentiful supply of pure water was one of the most essential requirements for both the pioneer settlers and their stock. Springs were utilized wherever possible. Sometimes water was hauled in barrels from a creek or river for family use. A hole dug in a ravine or near a stream served as a reservoir. To reach the water in these shallow unwalled wells a bucket was hung on a hook near the end of a pole which extended down into the bucket. When the bucket touched the water the pole was pressed down to make the bucket dip. But these shallow surface wells were not satisfactory. Not being walled, they would "cave in", and others had to be dug.

Sometimes these shallow wells were some distance from the house and many trips were required to supply a household. In some families a water yoke was used. This was a piece of wood some three feet long, heavier in the middle where it was hollowed out on one side and notched in the middle to fit over the shoulders and around the neck of the bearer. The hollow was padded with cloth. The yoke tapered outward and straps of leather were fastened near each end. These straps were of a length so that when the buckets were hung on the hooks at the lower end, the yoke being across a man's shoulders, he could hold the bails with his hands to steady them and

thus carry the weight of the water on his shoulders.

On my father's farm about a quarter of a mile from the house was a ravine in which a spring bubbled up clear and sparkling, never a very great flow but always running. Father dug out a place and nailed some boards together making a box about three feet square with no bottom. This bottomless box he placed in the hole he had made around the spring, filled in around the sides neatly, and fastened a cover on the box with leather hinges. An outlet was made in one side of the box a little below the top. When the water rose to this outlet it was carried away to the nearby creek in what we always spoke of as "the spring run". But one year after a long hard winter the spring became choked, the water ceased to flow, and no investigation ever explained why. An old man who used to come through the country selling medicine said, "Why, that is the work of a white weasel." We never saw the weasel, white or otherwise, but our beautiful crystal spring was gone forever.

Only a narrow branch of the Big Slough crossed our land. Father ditched it with a spade so that the land was well drained. On the east side where the slope was gentle we later had a beautiful timothy meadow. On the west side the rise

was steeper and at one place where a ravine came down from the upland there was a patch of timber which was always called "the little grove", for father never cut it. There the earliest flowers were found—hepaticas, lady's-slippers, Dutchman's-breeches, and others.

On this slope, soon after the spring closed, father opened a stone quarry. Near the quarry and the drainage ditch he dug a well and walled it with stone. He also made a pump for the well. This pump was square, made of boards. A pole with a leather valve at the lower end was hinged to a handle at the top. It was very crude, but it did the work. If the pump joints began to leak they were daubed with tar. Every pioneer farmer had a tar-bucket which usually hung at the rear end of his wagon, for tar was used not only to "grease" the wagon but to keep the joints tight.

Some years previous to this time my uncle had built and for a short time lived in a small, one story frame house on the west side of our farm. But he did not take kindly to farming. He was a blacksmith and went back to his trade. Mother liked the location of the little frame house and so for two or three years in the early sixties we moved there each spring after mother had thoroughly cleaned and whitewashed it.

All summer we hauled water from the old well

in a barrel laid in the front bob of a sled. The boys could drive close to the well, place a trough from the pump spout to a homemade funnel in the bung hole of the barrel, pump it full, and drive home. This was done very early in the morning or late in the evening. If the barrel was kept in the shade the water kept cool and good until the barrel was empty.

But when winter approached we moved back to the log cabin, nearer to water and in a more protected location. As our house furnishings were few it did not take long to move.

Shelter had to be provided for the horses, oxen, and cows. Some log barns were built, but the straw sheds or stables were very common. These were made by setting forked posts in the ground, laying poles from fork to fork, fastening cross poles on these, and then stacking straw on top and around this rude frame leaving one or more openings for doors. This made a very comfortable place for the stock. By renewing the straw at threshing time the barn was kept in good repair.

Some farmers were so shiftless and improvident that they built no shelter for their cattle and let the poor creatures live as best they could by feeding on straw stacked out in the field with only the straw stack to break the fierceness of the wintry winds and snows. But human nature was much

the same then as it is now, and most men either from natural kindness of heart or to prevent financial loss provided the best shelter that the material at hand would afford.

Hogs were not raised very extensively for some years, because of the lack of hog-tight fences. Most farmers raised and butchered just enough for their own meat. As more land was fenced, more hogs were raised.

Those who raised hogs for market had to haul them on sleds to Muscatine. When the weather was cold enough and the sledding was good, a number of men would spend two or three days butchering. The carcasses, frozen stiff with their feet sticking up, were piled like logs on the sleds. I distinctly remember the procession of sleds loaded with gleaming white hogs in the early morning, the sled runners creaking on the frozen snow as they started on their two-days' trip to Muscatine and back.

Butchering was quite an event, at least to the younger members of the family, especially if the year's supply of meat was butchered at one time. With knives whetted to razor edge and tubs filled with scalding water the slaughter began early in the forenoon. Each hog was hoisted by the hind legs with rope and tackle, scraped, disemboweled, and rinsed with cold water. In the evening the

carcasses were taken down, carried into the house, laid on a strong plank "meat bench", cut up into smooth shoulders, hams, sides, and other pieces, and packed in a barrel of brine "strong enough of salt to bear up an egg". The heads and feet were chopped off, cleaned, and soaked ready for head cheese and pickled pig's feet. Every waste scrap, such as the rind cut from the pork when it was fried, was carefully saved for soap grease. The fresh scraps of fat were rendered for lard or to use in a tin grease lamp with a rag wick.

Sausage was made by placing scraps of meat on a block and chopping them as fine as possible with an ax, seasoning with pepper and salt, and usually packing in jars. This was a tedious job and not very satisfactory. Years later when a neighbor bought a sausage mill, or grinder, as he called it, he was in great demand at butchering season, going from place to place so that if we wanted sausage made we had the casing ready and he ground, seasoned, and stuffed it by the pound. This was always done in the evening.

Soap making was a big job, but very important, for there was no soap to be had except homemade soft soap. Lye was leached from wood ashes, which had been kept dry until soap-making time. An ash hopper was constructed of slabs or clap-

boards set on end on a board bench. Around the base of the hopper a gutter was cut in the board, a little lower at one end, to carry off the lye. The cracks were stopped and a little straw or slough grass was placed in the bottom of the hopper to keep the ashes from washing through with the lye.

After the hopper was filled with ashes, preferably hardwood ashes, a depression was made in the center and this was kept full of water till the lye started to drip and run into an earthenware crock or an iron pot which had to be watched and emptied before it ran over and wasted the lye. The strong, acrid liquid was put into a big iron kettle which was hung on a pole between two stakes, a fire was built under the kettle, and the grease was added to the lye and boiled until it was dissolved. Now if the right strength of lye had been used and the right portion of grease, it was soap. If the lye was too strong, water had to be added; if too weak, more lye was added and boiled down. If the lye was all right and too much grease was used, when the soap got cold the extra grease could be scraped off and used again in another kettle of soap or for lights. One who understood soap making and had nice clean grease could make an article jelly-like in consistency ranging in color from amber to almost as white as lard. Homemade soft soap was used

for all purposes except shaving and to wash the babies. There was generally a piece of castile soap for those purposes.

One Sunday when the family was away from home, except my brother and I, a neighbor boy about fifteen came to ask if father had a sharp razor. He wanted to shave.

Brother replied, "Yes, everything our father has is sharp."

The boy grinned. "S'pose that means you?"

Brother, however, was probably thinking that father would never use dull or rusty tools. He explained that inasmuch as father had not shaved for a long time there was no shaving soap.

"Well," said the boy, "haven't you got any soft soap?"

Yes, we had plenty of that. And so he proceeded to shave with soft soap. I don't know whether it was the razor or the soap which took the soft beard off his face.

We had no soft water for washing clothes. On wash day a kettle of ashes and water was put on the stove and boiled. The lye thus made was dipped off into the wash boiler, enough to "break the water". A scum which rose to the top was skimmed off and the water was ready for use. Clothes all had to be washed in a tub on the washboard and wrung by hand.

Every housekeeper had her bluing bag. Indigo was bought by the ounce. It came in lumps any shape or size. A piece was put in the bluing bag, which was tossed into the rinse water and squeezed till the water was the right blue.

Starching was usually done with wheat-flour starch, but for "fine shirt" bosoms, collars, and cuffs there was "clear starch" which came in lumps, and was very inferior to the laundry starch of today. If it was not cooked properly, there would be trouble in ironing. The starch would stick to the iron, roll up on the clothes, and scorch, worrying the tired, hot, and impatient housewife who toiled back and forth from the table to the stove to change irons. Dresses and petticoats were wide and long, tucked and ruffled. Oh, the ironing!

Sewing was all done by hand. And there was as much or more work on a garment as there was after sewing machines were used. Tucking, ruffing, shirring, hemming, filling, everything—"seam and gusset and band, band and gusset and seam".

Stockings were made by hand through the whole process, from shearing the wool from the sheep's back, scouring, carding, and spinning it into yarn, dyeing the yarn and knitting it into stockings, socks, gloves, mittens, and scarfs or "comforters". Some of the comforters were knit

in tubular form, about six inches wide, and long enough to go around the neck of the wearer and cross on his chest. His coat was buttoned over it. Others were knit flat, back and forth, twelve to eighteen inches wide, and two to two and a half yards long. They were worn something like a shawl, crossed in front with the ends fastened behind or one end thrown over the shoulder. If a girl wanted to make her sweetheart a real nice present she would knit a comforter for him, or a pair of double mittens.

Very few men wore overcoats before the Civil War. I don't think I ever saw a boy's overcoat until long after that time. Those large comforters must have been a real comfort indeed. I have seen pictures of boys skating, the ends of their comforters flying out like streamers. (Was there ever a boy who did not like to skate? But girls did not skate. It would have been unladylike.)

All women wore shawls or cloaks, which were made of wool goods fashioned with a yoke to fit the shoulders, to which a straight piece of cloth was gathered or pleated and sewed on, and extended to the bottom of their long, full dress skirts. The cloak was lined throughout, perhaps interlined, which made it very warm and comfortable. It was "all buttoned down before", like "Old Grimes's" coat, and had an opening on each

side through which the wearer could put her hands. These slits could be buttoned if desired.

The winter head covering for women was either a quilted hood or a nubia, knit of yarn and resembling the men's long comforters, except the comforters were fringed at the end while the nubia was gathered across the end and a tassel of the yarn attached by a short cord. Nubias were worn around the head and neck, with one end poked under the last hitch around the neck. Sunbonnets, or shakers, were worn in summer.

Men and boys wore cloth caps in winter or perhaps fur caps homemade from the skin of some animal they had caught. It might be coon, muskrat, or squirrel. In the summer they wore "chip" hats or homemade straw ones.

A woman would take a pair of scissors, go to the oat field, cut close to the ground as many straws as she needed. Or after the grain was cut a sheaf was brought to the house. She would strip the blades off and cut the lower joint of the straw close to the joint. She then had a long, smooth, glistening straw. These straws were soaked a few minutes in a pan of water to soften them so they would not break in the process of braiding.

Taking seven straws, she ties them together tightly with the large ends even. Holding the

tied end toward her, she spreads the straws and begins her braid. With the right hand she folds the right-hand straw neatly over the one next to it and under the two next. Then with the left hand she folds the left-hand straw over the next and under the next two. This process is repeated: over one and under two, over one and under two. Of course the straws are not all the same length, and so when she comes to the end of a straw she takes another from the softened bunch, lays the butt end of it on the short end of the one needing a splice and proceeds. Over one and under two.

When her braid is long enough to make the size of hat desired she begins to sew it. The braid must be kept damp. She doubles the tied end squarely back under the braid to hide the end and sews it firmly in place, then, holding the edge of the braid under the edge of this beginning just far enough to sew through both at once, she sews "through and through" and round and round, till the top of the hat crown is large enough. Then she holds the braid tightly, turning squarely down for the sides of the crown. When it is tall enough, she crowds the braid so as to turn it out to form the brim.

SUSAN I. DUBELL